

# The Mystery of the Bloomfield Bridge



*Why is this bridge here?*

This pedestrian bridge [crosses I-494 just west of the Minneapolis Airport](#). It connects Bloomington to Richfield. I drive under it often and I wondered: why is it there? It's not in an area that is particularly walkable, and it doesn't connect any establishments that obviously need to be connected. So why was it built?

I often have curious thoughts like this, but I dismiss most of them because if I answered all of them I would get nothing else done. But one day I was walking out of a Taco Bell and found myself at the base of the bridge.



That only raised MORE questions! Why did the bridge just lead to some grass? Why isn't there a sidewalk? What is the point? It makes no sense!

Obviously I had to walk across it to see where it went. I found that it connects that Taco Bell... to a Grainger.<sup>Note</sup>



Grainger is an industrial supplier and the 11th largest e-commerce retailer in the world.<sup>Note</sup> Instead of "retail," for this location you should think "warehouse with a front desk" (not really the kind of place you would need to walk to).<sup>Note</sup>

I went in and asked the folks at Grainger about the bridge. They said they didn't like the bridge! Their employees don't use it, their customers don't use it, and litter collects on their end of the bridge.

They also told me they don't eat at Taco Bell. They recommended a better Mexican restaurant on their side of the interstate.

I went home that day without an answer. But it kept bothering me, so that night I decided I would solve this mystery once and for all.

## SEARCHING ONLINE

The internet is a good place to start. The bridge has a plaque that reads "Federal Aid Project FAI 494-4-32 Minnesota 1959."



So I tried searching for the project number.

Unfortunately, searches for Federal Aid Project 494-4-32 (or any iteration thereof) yields absolutely nothing. "494 bridge construction" is an even more useless search. There is a [federal aid project records site](#), but it only goes back to 1992.

I never would have expected to learn so little from such an audacious plaque! Why even *have* the plaque if it doesn't link to anything?

## WHAT WAS THERE BEFORE GRAINGER?

The project number isn't searchable, but perhaps the purpose will be obvious if we just look at photos of the area from when it was built.



The good news is that there were aerial photos taken around that time. The confusing news is that, at the time of construction, the south side of the bridge (where Grainger is now) was just an empty field!

Here is an aerial photo with the bridge marked with a red arrow. Beneath the bridge you can see the empty lot.



Why would you build a pedestrian bridge to an empty field?! That makes even less sense. Yes there is a neighborhood south of the field, but if you are in that neighborhood surely you could just use the sidewalk on one of those other two bridges a few hundred feet to the east or west.<sup>Note</sup> Why build the bridge?

## LET'S ASK AROUND

Earlier I said that if you search "494 bridge construction" that you don't get useful results. That is not entirely true: you do find the [I-494 Corridor Commission](#).

I-494 Corridor Commission

The I-494 corridor commission was formed by the cities located along its route. Its purpose is to address the terrible traffic on that stretch of freeway. They do this mostly by encouraging people not to drive on I-494. (Because you can't have traffic, if you don't have traffic.)

I sent a note to the Executive Director of the Commission, Melissa Madison.<sup>Note</sup> I explained what I was researching (acknowledging that it was an... oddly specific topic) and asked whether she could provide me with any information about why the bridge was built.

Melissa got back to me quickly and was gracious with her time. She did not know why the bridge was there, but she very generously sent a few feelers out to city and state employees to see what information was available.

Melissa connected me to the Bloomington City Planning Manager, Glen Markegard. Glen didn't know of any specific reason why the bridge was there either. However, he pointed out that it was probably built *in anticipation of future development*. He said that a lot of infrastructure at that time was necessarily built in anticipation of future growth, and the empty field seemed to support that idea here.

Let's explore that theory!

## STATE OF THE INTERSTATES IN 1959

1959 was the heyday of construction of the interstate system. A few years earlier, President Eisenhower decided there were too many bumps on the road to California (and was jealous of the Germans' ability to move military equipment around easily),<sup>Note</sup> so he signed the [Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956](#).



This act provided substantial federal funding to states if they would build interstate highways. The feds would pay up to 90% of the costs,<sup>Note</sup> as long as the states covered the rest. But the impetus was on the states to plan and direct these roads, so if you wanted the money you had to figure out how to use it.<sup>Note</sup>

If you read newspaper articles from that time period (and believe me, I have now read many), you will find a political atmosphere that demanded moving quickly to use those federal funds to build the interstate system.

Minnesota was in a particularly difficult situation. Its neighbors had an advantage: it is relatively easy to build interstates in North Dakota or Iowa where you are mostly taking over strips of farmland. In contrast, it is difficult to evict the tens of thousands of people necessary to build interstates through Minneapolis.

Thus, the speed of interstate construction was a hot political topic. See for example this article in the *Minneapolis Star* from 1960.<sup>Note</sup>



Politicians had a lot of incentive to move quickly to plan and construct the interstate. They had funds to spare and need to stand up works programs to keep folks employed.<sup>Note</sup> Combine this with the [high growth in the Richfield area](#) at the time and the anticipation of future development, and you have substantial fuel to expedite decision-making. Perhaps they just were building fast and making decisions quickly and there was no real reason for the bridge.

Well, I am willing to accept that the bar was low for deciding to build a bridge. But I am not willing to accept that there was *no reason* for the bridge to be built *there*. They could have placed it a mile down one way or the other. If it was just 'because,' why not somewhere else?

## **ASIDE: WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT THIS BRIDGE AGAIN?**

It is at about this point in the story that whoever is enduring hearing about it from me inevitably asks: "Hold on, why do we care about this bridge so much?" Which, yes, fair question.

Up until this point, it was curiosity. From here on out though, it is stubbornness.

I don't understand why this question is so difficult to answer. There IS a reason that bridge was built, and by golly I am going to find it! Will it be a bribe from a local business? A conspiracy with the construction company? An ordinance that requires a bridge every 5 miles? A makeshift deer crossing built by the DNR? Someone accidentally copy-pasted a bridge when playing *Cities: Skylines of Minnesota*?

Whatever it is, I want to know!

## **IS IT A REGULATION?**

Many people I discussed this with suggested there could be a law requiring a minimum number of pedestrian bridge crossings per XX miles of interstate. We should not rule this out too quickly. After all, while the 1960s is the era of cars, bicyclists were a loud voice advocating for road improvements and standards at the beginning of the 20th century (you can read more about this in the early chapters of *The Big Roads* by Earl Swift). Perhaps there was a vocal group that got a law signed.

But of course, bicycle advocacy probably doesn't apply to the bridge in question, as it has stairs—which are not known for being conducive to bicyclists.

*Edit: I was wrong! I later learned that these stairs were specially designed to accomodate bicycles! Learn more in this note:*<sup>Note</sup>

After I published this, many people emailed me to say that they used the bridge to cross I-494 with their bikes, and that they appreciated the ramp it had for bicycles. When I crossed the bridge I did not notice: it has ramps on both sides that are the width of bicycle tires so that you

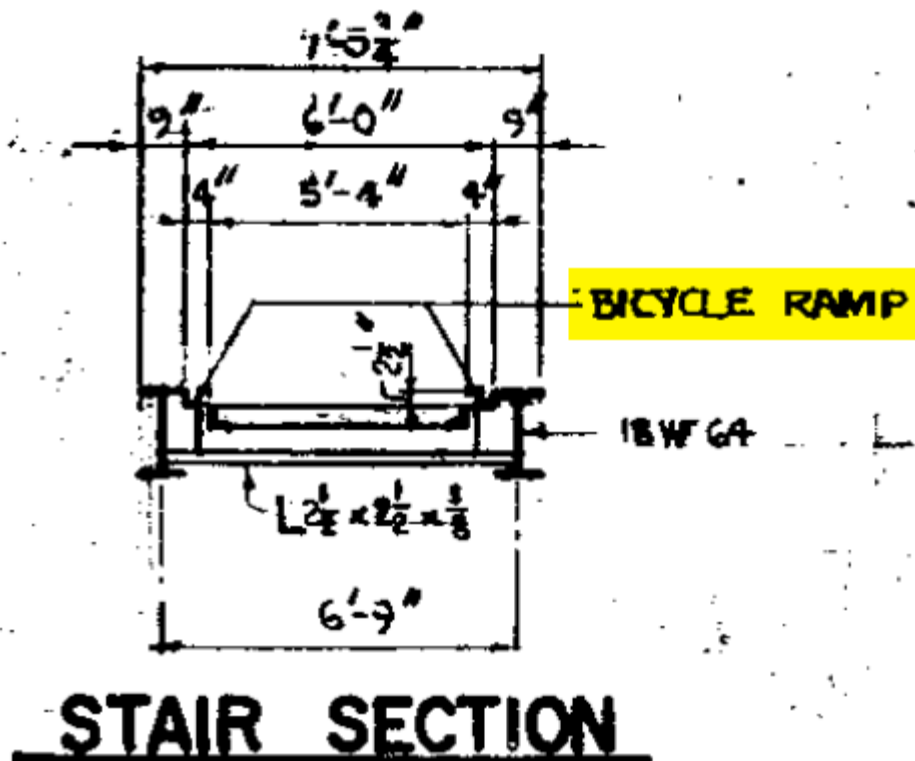


can push your bike up the stairs.

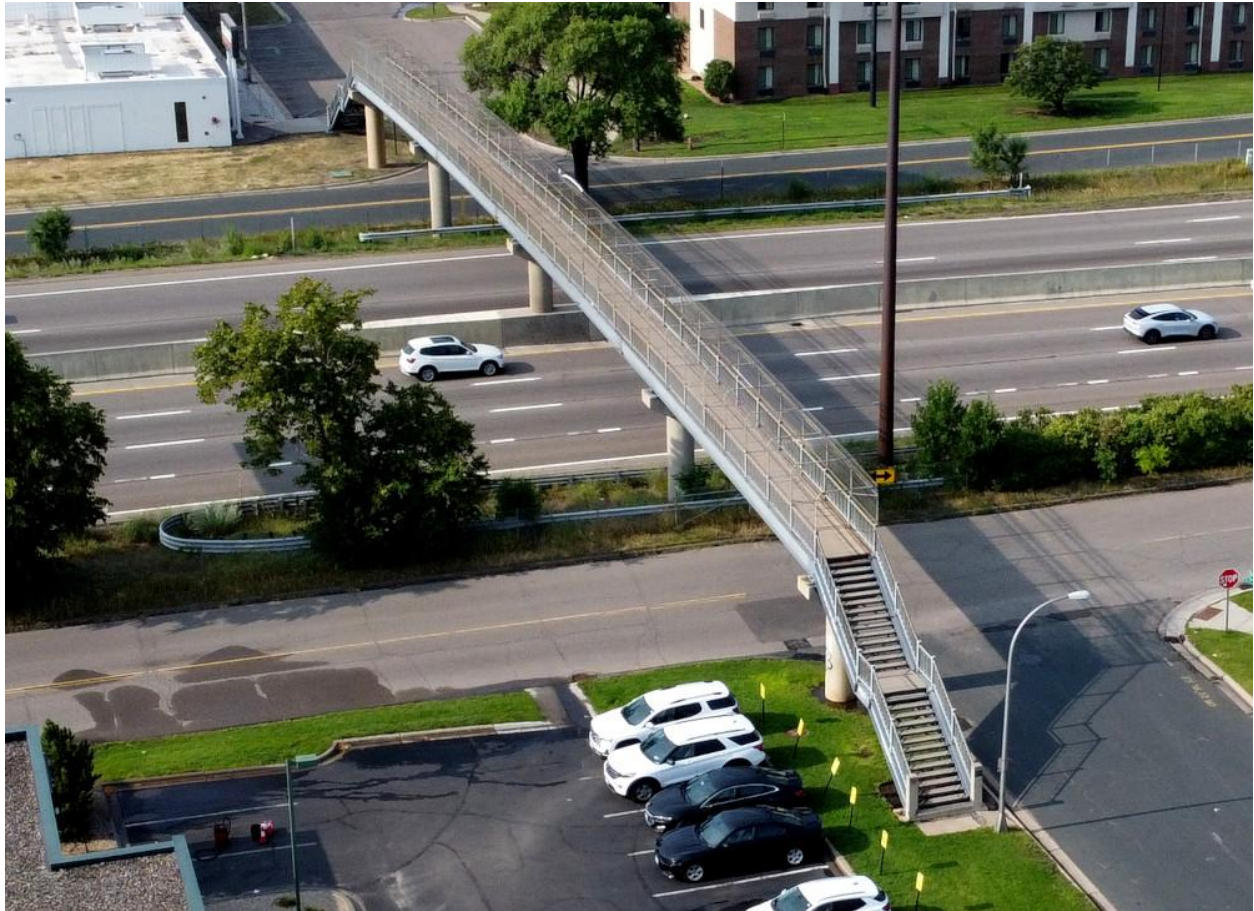


At first I thought that was just an artifact of construction. To me it does not look like it was really intended for bicycle use, but more like a happy accident that is handy for bicyclists. But then I was wrong again! One reader, Jason Hall, helpfully pointed out that this little 4-inch flat ramp was explicitly labeled a bicycle ramp in the original engineering plans:





How cool is that! Perhaps not the epitome of bike-friendly, and still not helpful for those in wheelchairs or who might otherwise find difficulty with stairs, but at least they did think of kids pushing bikes.



In my research, I have found no law or regulation that requires a certain number of pedestrian or bicycle bridges to be built over interstates. There *will be* regulations relating to *stairs*, because that bridge is definitely not ADA-compliant. But those laws won't gain momentum until the 1980s culminating in the [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990](#).

Also: there are clearly thousands of miles of interstate highways across the country in rural areas with *no* pedestrian bridges (source: just drive down any interstate outside of a metro area). On the entire 42-mile stretch of interstate 494, there is only one other pedestrian footbridge that was built during the same period. So no dice on a law.

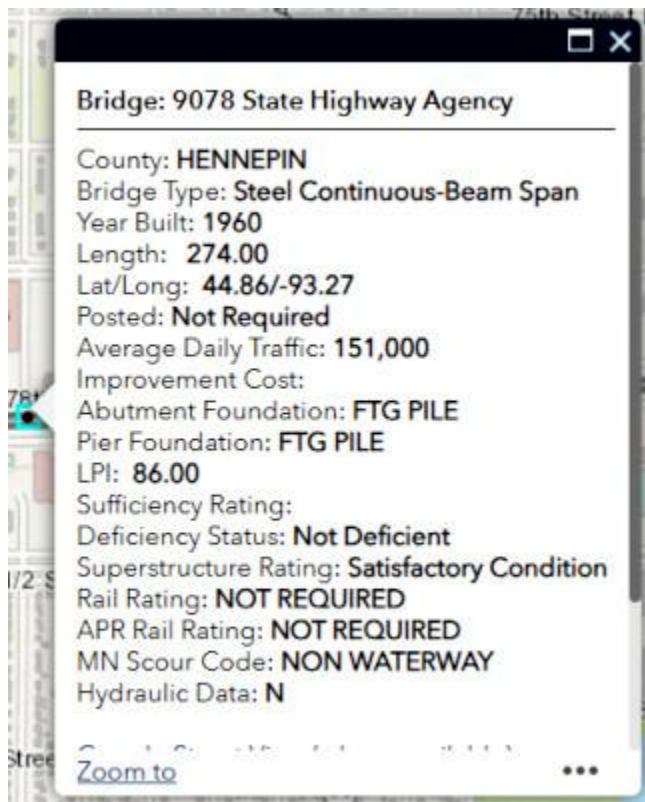
Even if there was a *guideline* as to where to build bridges (and we'll explore one in a bit), we would expect discretion as to where the bridge is built. If so, we can ask why *this specific site* was chosen.

## MnDOT MAINTAINS IT; LET'S ASK THEM

Highways in Minnesota are maintained by MnDOT. They have a handy [interactive bridge map](#) that shows all of the bridges in the state. And there are a LOT of bridges.



They even have detailed maintenance records available. The site indicates that the bridge we care about is **bridge #9078**. But unless you are interested in an empty hydraulics report, these reports tell you very little.



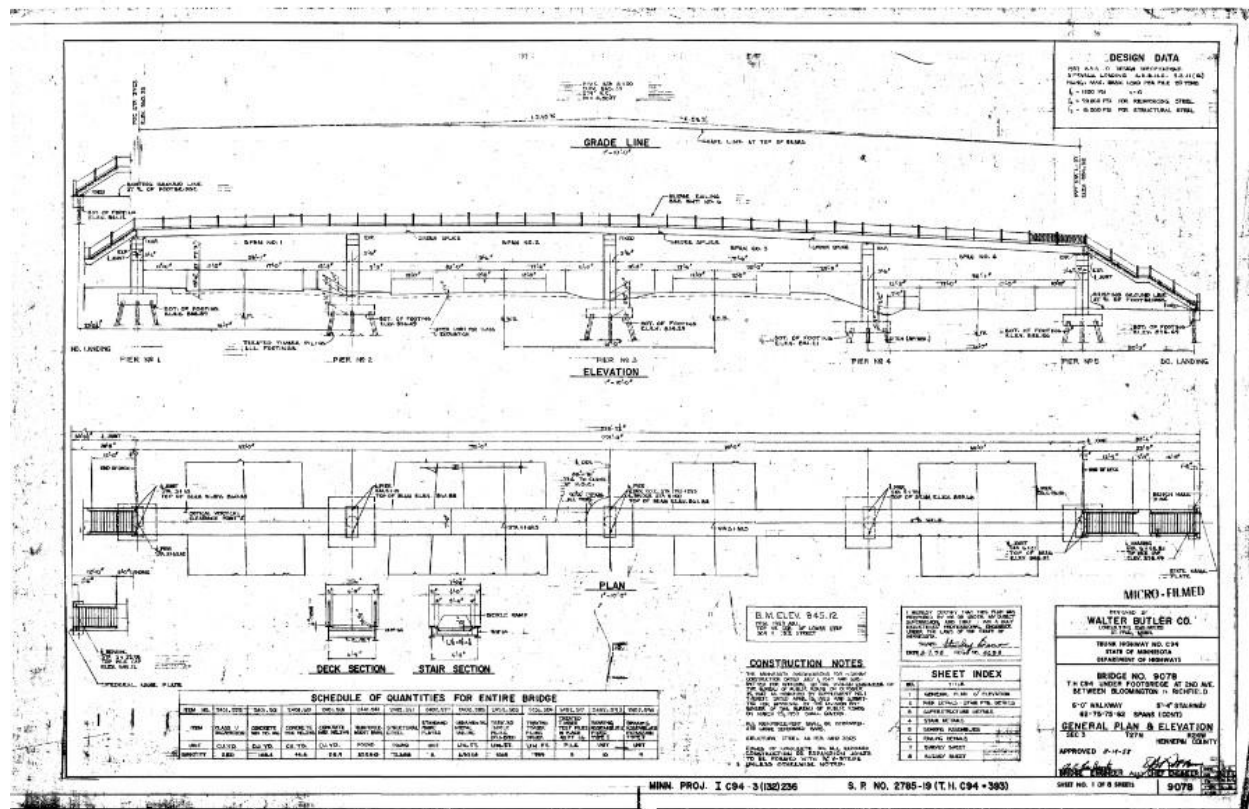
However, they do have contact information. So I wrote to the Bridges Division of the Minnesota Department of Transportation.<sup>Note</sup> I shared what I was researching (again acknowledging that



this was an... oddly specific topic) and asked them if they could kindly share any information about the bridge or its original construction plans.

Peter Wilson of the Bridges Division got back to me very quickly.<sup>Note</sup> He provided the original engineering plans as well as photos of the bridge taken shortly after construction!

Let's look at the engineering plans first:



These thoroughly describe how the bridge was built. It names many of the people and companies involved in building the bridge, like Walter Butler Co. It does not, however, explain WHY the bridge was built here.

There is a signature block and additional project numbers:

B.M. ELEV. 845.12 INSL. 1929 ADJ. TOP OF C&N OF LOWER STYP 309 E 78TH STREET		I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PLAN WAS PREPARED BY ME OR UNDER MY DIRECT SUPERVISION AND THAT I AM A DULY REGISTERED PROFESSIONAL ENGINEER UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF MINNESOTA. SIGNED: <i>Walter Butler</i> DATE: 8-7-58 REG. NO. 5623		DESIGNED BY <b>WALTER BUTLER CO.</b> CONSULTING ENGINEERS ST. PAUL, MINN.																			
<b>CONSTRUCTION NOTES</b> THE MINNESOTA SPECIFICATIONS FOR HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION DATED JULY 1, 1947 AND SUB- MITTED FOR APPROVAL BY THE DIVISION ENGINEER OF THE BUREAU OF PUBLIC ROADS ON OCTOBER 15, 1947 AS MODIFIED BY SUPPLEMENT NO. 1 THEREIN DATED APRIL 15, 1953 AND SUBMIT- TED FOR APPROVAL BY THE DIVISION EN- GINEER OF THE BUREAU OF PUBLIC ROADS ON MARCH 25, 1953 SHALL GOVERN. ALL REINFORCEMENT SHALL BE INTERMEDI- ATE GRADE DEFORMED BARS. STRUCTURAL STEEL AS PER MND 3305 EDGES OF CONCRETE ON ALL EXPOSED CONSTRUCTION OR EXPANSION JOINTS TO BE FORMED WITH 1/2" V-STRIPE UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.		<b>SHEET INDEX</b> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>NO.</th> <th>TITLE</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>GENERAL PLAN &amp; ELEVATION</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2</td> <td>PIER DETAILS - STAIR FTS. DETAILS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3</td> <td>SUPERSTRUCTURE DETAILS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4</td> <td>STAIR DETAILS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>DRAINAGE ASSEMBLIES</td> </tr> <tr> <td>6</td> <td>RAILING DETAILS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>7</td> <td>SURVEY SHEET</td> </tr> <tr> <td>8</td> <td>SURVEY SHEET</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		NO.	TITLE	1	GENERAL PLAN & ELEVATION	2	PIER DETAILS - STAIR FTS. DETAILS	3	SUPERSTRUCTURE DETAILS	4	STAIR DETAILS	5	DRAINAGE ASSEMBLIES	6	RAILING DETAILS	7	SURVEY SHEET	8	SURVEY SHEET	TRUNK HIGHWAY NO. C94 STATE OF MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF HIGHWAYS  <b>BRIDGE NO. 9078</b> T.H. C94 UNDER FOOTBRIDGE AT 2ND AVE. BETWEEN BLOOMINGTON & RICHFIELD 6'-0" WALKWAY 5'-4" STAIRWAY 62'-75'-75'-62 SPANS (CONT) <b>GENERAL PLAN &amp; ELEVATION</b> SEC 3 T27N R24W HENNEPIN COUNTY APPROVED 8-11-58 <i>Walter Butler</i> <i>John J. [unclear]</i> BRIDGE ENGINEER ASS'Y CHIEF ENGINEER SHEET NO. 1 OF 8 SHEETS <b>9078</b>	
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I tried looking up these project numbers, but to no avail.<sup>Note</sup> I also looked up the people who are named in the document. Because they *signed* their names, this was not the easiest of tasks, but I did make some out.

Unfortunately all I found were obituaries. Anyone of age to make decisions about building bridges (i.e., 30-50 years old) in 1959 would be between 90 and 110 today. More directly: everyone involved in designing this bridge is now dead.<sup>Note</sup>

The engineering company was **Walter Butler Co.** [The Butler family owned a large construction and engineering design company](#) that benefited from being in the right place at the right time during a boom in growth in Minnesota and the construction of the interstates.<sup>Note</sup> However, [most legacy information about the Butler family and their companies](#) dates back to the 1800s, which is too early to apply to the bridge.

Now let's look at the photographs MnDOT provided. First is a side view, where the photographer is standing where Grainger is located today and looking northwest:

7  
7



That's our bridge! Here is the closest I can get to replicating that shot:





Not much about the bridge has changed! But there is also not much to learn from that photo. Here is the other one:



In the foreground is that empty field, which tells us nothing new. But in the background is a thrift store—that's new! The small signs on the ground say "FAST! SAVE! POWER!<sup>Note</sup> FAST!" The large sign on the left says "**Atlantic Mills Thrift Center.**" Maybe the thrift store lobbied for or funded a pedestrian bridge to their store.

I have family from this area, so I sent a few text messages asking grandparents if they were familiar with Atlantic Mills.<sup>Note</sup> My grandmother was familiar with it, but only remembered that "it had very good sales!"<sup>Note</sup> She only ever drove to the store though, so no support for why the pedestrian bridge would be useful.

The next place to search for the store is in old newspapers. I had previously tried searching for iterations of "494," "78th street,"<sup>Note</sup> and "pedestrian bridge" in newspaper archive services, but these don't yield very helpful results.<sup>Note</sup>

But searching for Atlantic Mills does yield results. I found an article that indicated that the location for that store was being decided in 1959, the year the bridge was built!

# South Minneapolis to Get Top Atlantic Mills Unit

By RALPH MASON  
Minneapolis Star Staff Writer

Atlantic Mills Corp., which opened a self-service department store in Crystal last August, today announced it will build and open a second store in south Minneapolis before the end of 1959.

Sidney Mittleman, executive vice president of Virginia Dare Stores, parent company of Atlantic Mills, said the new store will be the largest in the company's chain and will be its 15th outlet.

"A good many of our decisions have not been made," Mittleman said, "but the new building will be approximately 100,000 square feet or more in size.

"It will be a one-story structure of brick and con-

crete block. There will be parking for 1,000 cars."

Mittleman's statement that the store would be the chain's largest would indicate it might be as large as 125,000 square feet. The company already has stores of 100,000 to 120,000 square feet in eastern cities.

Cost of constructing such a building is estimated at more than one million dollars.

Mittleman said construction would start in the early spring and be completed by fall, with the store opening by the end of 1959.

The site has not been definitely selected, Mittleman said, but it will be in the "southern part of the city." It was indicated this could mean south Minneapolis, Richfield or Bloomington. Local sources have mentioned 78th St. and Nicollet

Av. as a possible site.

The firm's present store, known as Atlantic Mills Thrift Center, is at 5141 Lakeland Av., Crystal. The company took a five-year lease last summer on a 55,000-square-foot building, formerly used as a manufacturing plant by Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills.

Mittleman, who is managing director of the Atlantic Mills operation, said \$50,000 was spent in remodeling the interior of the one-story building and blacktopping a lot to accommodate 750 cars.

The store offers a wide line of low-cost merchandise, including housewares, small appliances, apparel, sporting goods and toys.

"We've been overwhelmed by the reception our first store in this area has received," Mittleman said.

"It has topped anything we've experienced in any other part of the country. It is a natural step to select Minneapolis as the location for the newest and largest store in our expanding operations."

## GRAIN FUTURES

MINNEAPOLIS									
Wheat	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Barley	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Oats	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Rye	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Flour	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

## Plan to Discontinue

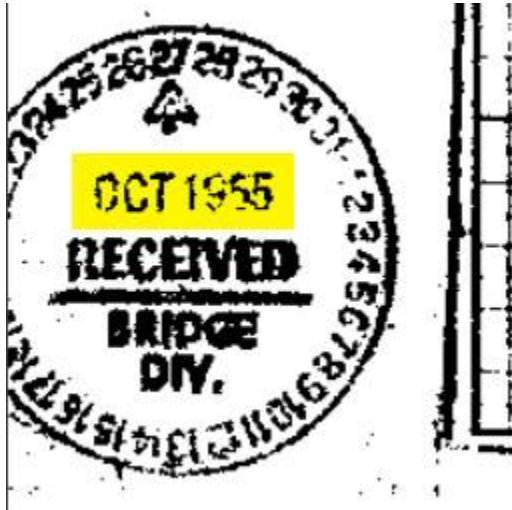
## Two Trains Blocked

WASHINGTON—(UPI)—A

According to the article, the location of the thrift store location was not yet finalized in February of 1959. We can cross-reference that date with the dates from the engineering plans MnDOT shared with me. The cover sheet specifies the plans for the bridge were approved in 1958:

DESIGNED BY <b>WALTER BUTLER CO.</b> CONSULTING ENGINEERS ST. PAUL, MINN.	
TRUNK HIGHWAY NO. C94 STATE OF MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF HIGHWAYS	
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6'-0" WALKWAY	5'-4" STAIRWAY
62-75-75-62 SPANS (CONT)	
GENERAL PLAN & ELEVATION	
SEC 3	T27N R24W
HENNEPIN COUNTY	
APPROVED 8-19-58	
BRIDGE ENGINEER	ASSY. CHIEF ENGINEER
SHEET NO. 1 OF 8 SHEETS	
9078	

And the certification stamp on the site survey on a later page is dated to October of 1955:

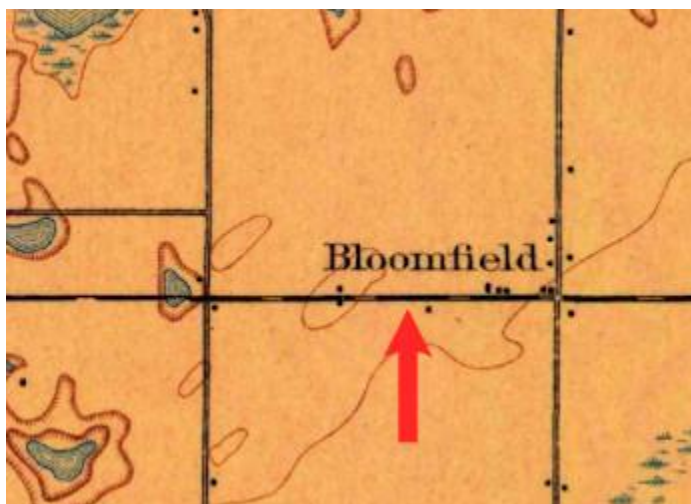


That means the planning for the bridge started at least 3 years before the Atlantic Mills thrift store location was finalized. Thus, it is unlikely that the thrift store influenced the location of the bridge—if anything, the inverse may be true.

## WHAT HAVE I MISSED? OLD MAPS WILL TELL

At this point I had exhausted all my active leads. So I went back to the collection of aerial photos and maps from the area from the 1800s and 1900s. After flipping through a few, I found two interesting things.

First, the area around where the bridge will be built was called "Bloomfield." I've indicated the place where the bridge will be built on this small section of a [USGS map from 1896](#):

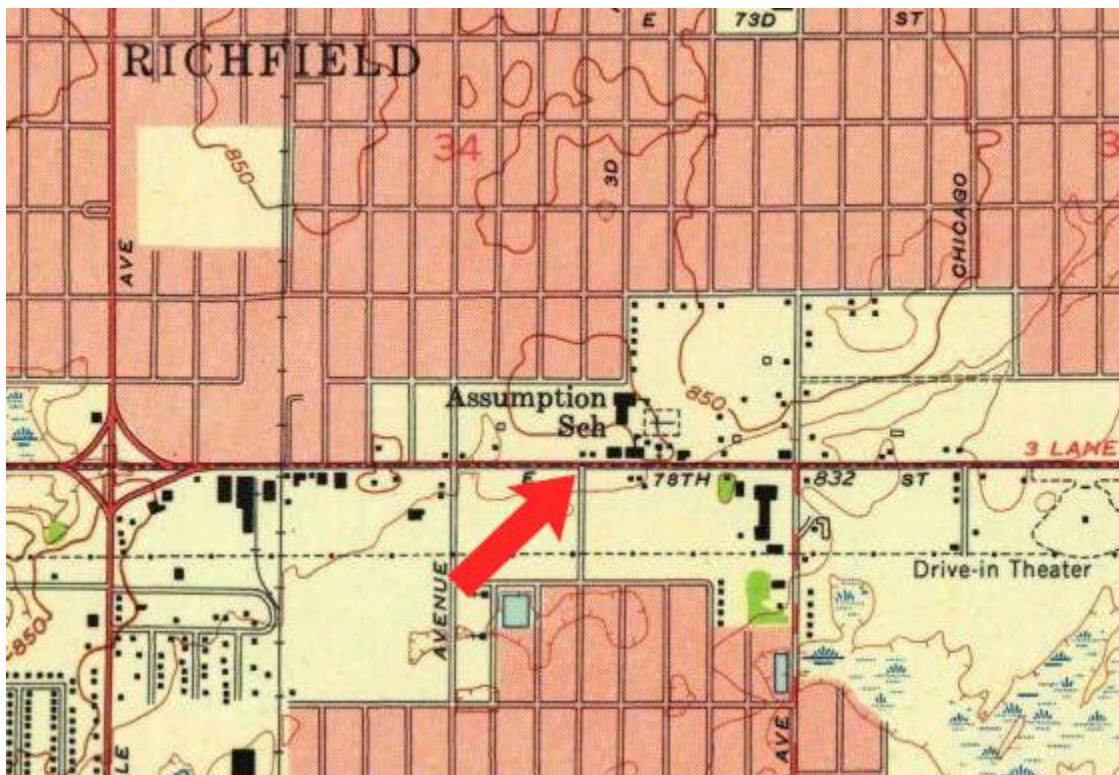




The name "Bloomfield" appears on maps at that spot from the late 1800s all the way up until the 1950s, when it disappears. No one calls that place "Bloomfield" today.<sup>Note</sup> Minnesota does have a [township named Bloomfield](#), but that one is down in southeastern Minnesota, 120 miles away.

However, the area labeled Bloomfield on this map refers to the area between what is now *Bloomington* and *Richfield*, which can't be a coincidence... right?<sup>Note</sup> We will come back to this later.

The other thing I found was a more immediately promising lead. On this [1954 map from the US Department of the Interior](#), I found a prominent label for "**Assumption Sch.**" just north where the bridge will be built. I've indicated the future location of the bridge with a red arrow here:



Now THAT is a lead!! If "sch" is short for "school,"<sup>Note</sup> then that's a great contender for a reason to build a bridge!

## ASSUMPTION CHURCH AND SCHOOL

This building is still there; it is the Church of the Assumption of Mary in Richfield.



I hadn't noticed it before because the church itself is set back from the interstate behind a row of trees. The distance is in part due to the church's cemetery, which sits between the church and the interstate. Very long note

The red arrow below points to the church, as viewed from the bridge.



The website for the church includes a [history section](#). Jackpot!

The church was originally built in the 1800s, but grew with the community in the 1900s. The school in the church served a large number of children in the community, **peaking in attendance at 1,170 students in 1959-1961, right when the bridge was built!**

What a find! The [desire paths](#) that we saw on the aerial photo earlier through the empty lot would track with kids walking from that neighborhood over the bridge to go to school.

I reached out the to church and asked if they would be kind enough to provide my contact information to anyone in their parish who lived in the area in the 1950s or 1960s and would be open to speaking with me.<sup>Note</sup>

## Ann Anton's story

The next day I received a call from Ann Anton. Ann was born in 1948, so she was 75 years old when I spoke with her. Her family moved to Richfield in the 1950s and still lives there today. Here's a photo of Ann in front of her house in 1969:





Ann attended school at Assumption in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. She lived on the north side of the bridge, so she didn't need to take the bridge regularly. But she knew many kids who did! **She said it was *certainly* used by the schoolchildren at Assumption School.** She described often running across the bridge as a child.

I had read that Assumption Church was a pillar of the growing community in the 1950s and 1960s. Ann confirmed this: she said it was the "hub of social activity in the area." It was so packed that the congregation came together to build an Activities building, with funding acquired by assembling hundreds of community members to be the "broom brigade" for the [Met Stadium](#), which was located where the Mall of America is today.

Ann told me it was hard to overstate how homogeneous the area was. All the families were the same age, and they were all white, and they all were the same economic class, and they all had the same backgrounds (most of the dads were WW2 vets). They all had a bunch of kids at the same time. She described the "baby boom" more acutely than I had ever heard it described before. For her, it was a "swarm of hundreds of kids" the *exact same age*.

Ann was very thoughtful. She pointed out that while she enjoyed her upbringing, she missed out on interacting with a more diverse community in her childhood. She was grateful for the exposure to a much different community now (the community is now so prominently Hispanic that a third of the services at the church are held in Spanish).

Ann's mother is Florence Simon, and she was at one point the Principal of Assumption School! Florence is also still alive, at 99 years old(!) when I spoke with her. But she did not recall the bridge, nor being consulted about the construction of the interstate.<sup>Note</sup> Ann also couldn't say for sure why the bridge was originally built (no one consulted 10-year-old Ann), but she did "strongly suspect" the school was the reason.

This is promising support for the theory that the bridge was built to go to the school! But now that I am this deep, I want hard evidence. Let's keep looking.

## OTHER MINNESOTA INTERSTATE RESEARCH AND HISTORY PROJECTS

If you do enough searching about the construction of pedestrian bridges over interstates in Minnesota,<sup>Note</sup> you will eventually come upon these three sources:

1. [\*Politics and Freeways: Building the Twin Cities Interstate System\*](#) by Patricia Cavanaugh, which shares a detailed 136-page account of the politics and decisions for building the interstates in Minnesota
2. [Streets.mn](#), an unofficial but helpful (and opinionated<sup>Note</sup>) site that provides various histories and insights into road-building in Minnesota
3. [A public history of 35W](#), which details the human toll building the interstates took on local communities—particularly Black communities near Minneapolis and St. Paul, which were uprooted to make way for the interstates<sup>Note</sup>

The three sources are valuable in their own ways, but they all gloss over the construction of Interstate 494. Compared to its peers, this section of the interstate was uncontroversial, simple to acquire,<sup>Note</sup> and among the fastest to plan and build.

However, all three sources frequently mention one key planning report from the time: a report written by George Barton titled "Freeways in Minneapolis" published in 1957.<sup>Note</sup>

## THE BARTON REPORT

The Barton report was commissioned by Minneapolis to determine where the interstates should be constructed. Unfortunately, I could not find a digital copy of the Barton Report online. Thankfully: the [Minnesota Historical Society](#) maintains an [original paper copy](#) of the report. So I went up to St. Paul to review it for myself.<sup>Note</sup>

The Barton report does not cover I-494.<sup>Note</sup> But it does provide a lot of insight into how planners thought about interstate construction at the time. The most relevant page in the Barton report is this one, which specifically recommends building overpass walkways near churches and schools.

### Relation to Schools and School Districts

Because of irregularities in the boundaries of school districts it is impractical to find any acceptable highway alignment which does not intrude on some districts. A line producing the least disruption would be one on Nicollet but such a location is obviously impractical. In comparing a Stevens Avenue route with a Bryant Avenue location it appears that Stevens Avenue is somewhat preferable, Figure 13. This is especially true in the light of plans by the Board of Education to restudy the school districts near the central business district.

If openings across the freeway are properly located with respect to the schools, the freeways need not represent an appreciable obstacle to the circulation of school children. So far as physical safety is concerned they may be preferable to surface streets carrying large volumes of traffic.

That is the most direct supporting evidence we have seen so far to indicate that a pedestrian bridge over an interstate near a school may have been primarily built for the purpose of enabling students to walk to that school! It seems increasingly likely that Assumption School is the reason for the bridge.<sup>Note</sup>

## **HISTORICAL RECORD REVIEW**

Since I was already at the History Center,<sup>Note</sup> I asked the staff to pull every other record on interstate planning, federal aid projects, and the Minnesota Highway Department that could possibly be related to Interstate 494 or bridge construction. Bless the Historical Society staff and their patience to go down into the archives to pull boxes for me.<sup>Note</sup>





I reviewed *many* records from state and county agencies from the 1950s and 1960s. I learned all about apportionments and contracting for the interstates in Minnesota. And I probably caught some weird diseases flipping through so much dusty old paperwork.<sup>Note</sup>



I went through the Highway Department project files,<sup>Note</sup> Federal Aid files,<sup>Note</sup> bridge correspondence,<sup>Note</sup> and county commissioner correspondence,<sup>Note</sup>. I even read through a tome of annual reports from the Hennepin County Highway Department.



Most of them were typed, but some of them were handwritten, like this record of individual bridges:

W.C.N. ✓

SCHEDULED FOR LETTING  
BETW. JAN. 1, 1956 & JULY 1, 1956

STATE OF MINNESOTA  
DEPARTMENT OF HIGHWAYS

BRIDGE PROJECTS IN PROPOSED CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM FOR  
WHICH CONSTRUCTION WITH BOND ISSUE FUNDS COULD BE CONSIDERED

11-19-55  
264

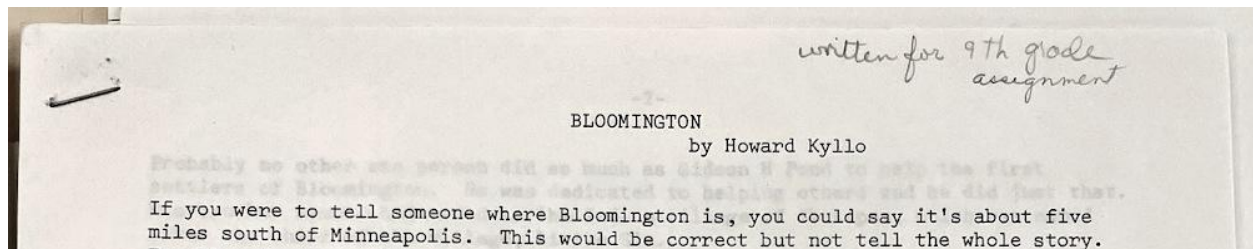
DISTRICT	T.H. NO.	BRIDGE NO.	LOCATION	APPROXIMATE DIMENSIONS OF UPPER DECK OF PROPOSED STRUCTURE					SQ. FT. OF BR. BETW. RAILS	ESTIMATED CONSTRUCTION COST OF EACH BRIDGE	TENTATIVE DATE FOR LETTING BRIDGE CONTRACT
				LENGTH OVER ALL FT.	RDWY. WIDTH	CTR. IS. LAND	CURBS	SIDE WALK			
2	1	9070	OVER THIEF RIVER IN THIEF RIVER FALLS PEDESTRIAN O.H. - 5TH AVE	170'	30'	-	2@3'	-	6120	100,000	
3	23	6847	NEAR ST. CLOUD	156'	-	-	-	6'	940	35,000	
3	23	9021 & 9022	TWIN BRIDGES IN EAST ST. CLOUD	155'	39'	-	1@2'	1@4'	6980	230,000	
3	240	6557	OVER MISS. RIVER, GN. RR. IN CLEARWATER OVER RUM RIVER	1122'	30'	-	2@3'	-	40390	850,000	
3	95	9016	8.0 MI. W. CAMBRIDGE OVER BUFFALO RIVER	220'	30'	-	2@2'	-		120,000	TOTAL-DIST. 3 1,235,000
4	10	9026	IN HAWLEY	55'	44'	-	2@2'	-	2640	50,000	
5	65	6583	T.H. 65 OMAHA RR. & SIDE ROAD 1.3 MI. S. OF MINN. RIVER	166'	2@27'	-	2@3'	-	10620	170,000	
5	13	6578	T.H. 13 T.H. 65 1.7 MI. S. OF MINN. RIVER	160'	2@36'	4'	2@3'	-	13120	220,000	
5	7	4069	MILL ST. T.H. 7 & M. ST. L. RY. IN EXCELSIOR	220'	30'	-	-	2@5'	8100	150,000	TOTAL-DIST. #5 540,000
6	105	5971	OVER TURTLE CREEK 0.9 MI. S. OF AUSTIN OVER CANNON RIVER	150'	30'	-	2@3'	-	5400	90,000	
6	218	6865	IN NORTHFIELD	265'	52'	-	-	2@5'	16430	270,000	
6	65	9051 & 9052	T.H. 65 AIRPORT ENTR. 1.0 MI. N. OF OWATONNA	130'	30'	-	2@2'	-	4420	140,000	
6	65	9054 & 9055	T.H. 65 SAR 9 TWIN BRIDGES IN CLINTON FALLS	130'	31'	-	2@2'	-	4550	160,000	
6	65	9056	SAR 12 T.H. 65 IN MEDFORD	203'	30'	-	2@3'	-	7310	120,000	
6	65	7162	SAR 12 STRAIGHT RIVER IN MEDFORD	205'	30'	-	2@3'	-	7380	120,000	
6	61	9045 & 9046	OVER BURNS VALLEY CR. TWIN BRIDGES 1.0 MI. S.E. OF WINONA	160'	30'	-	2@3'	-	5760	190,000	
6	61	9092 & 9093	OVER PLEASANT VALLEY CR. TWIN BRIDGES 3.9 MI. S.E. OF WINONA	120'	30'	-	2@3'	-	4320	150,000	TOTAL-DIST. #6 1,240,000

SHEET 1 OF 2 SURVEY

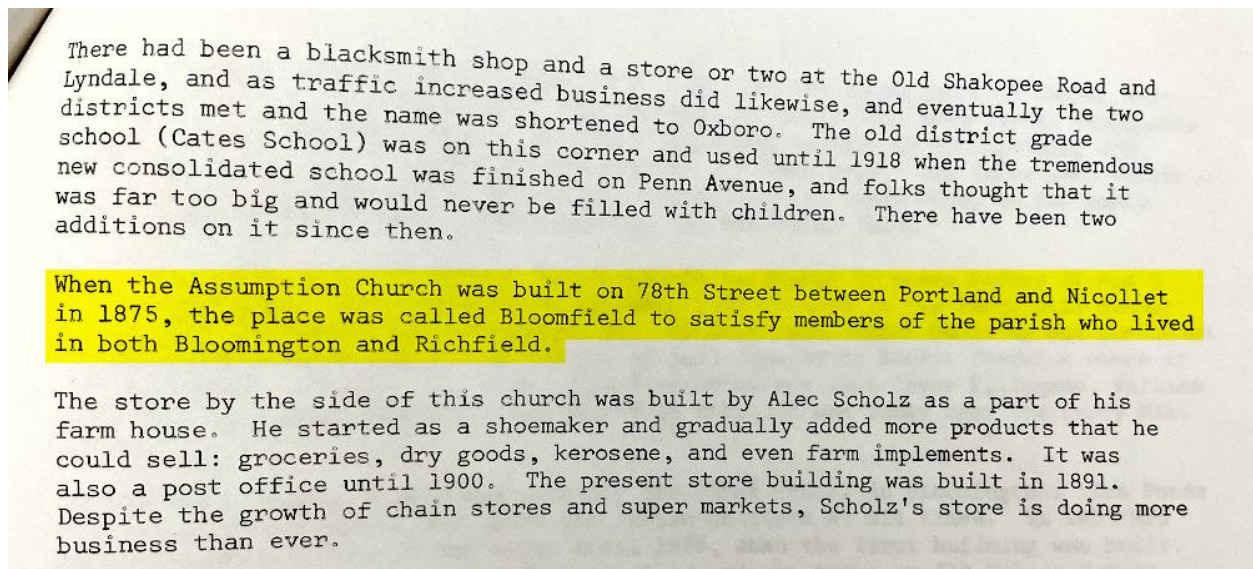
I don't think you will mind taking my word for it: I exhausted all the official records at the Minnesota Historical Society and found no additional information about bridge #9078.

## THE SCHOOL REPORT

The most surprisingly useful document I reviewed was not a government record at all. It was a history report written by a 9th grader named Howard Kylo in 1951.<sup>Note</sup>



Howard wrote this as a school assignment, and it somehow found its way into the stacks of the historical society. I enjoyed the whole thing. In his paper, Howard answers a question that we posed way back when we looked at the maps of the area from the 1800s.



Remember that map with "Bloomfield" on it? The area was called Bloomfield *because of the church*, and it got that name *because of the close connection between Bloomington and Richfield!*

I know this sounds a bit old and trivial, but bear with me for a second. There was such a close community connection between both sides of that interstate when they built the church that they went to the trouble of *concatenating the names of the cities* to showcase the connection. **What could be more apropos than a pedestrian bridge reconnecting the two communities at the site of *Bloomfield*?**<sup>Note</sup>



However, Howard the 9th grader did not do a good job of citing his sources,<sup>Note</sup> so I went looking for another primary source to back up Howard's bold claim.

Sure enough, documents recording the history of Assumption Church buttress the Bloomfield fact:

The first Catholic church was built in Richfield, but many Bloomington people helped to build this church. The following is a list of the pledges of the founders of the church:

Valentine Haeg	\$350	George Joseph Duell	\$ 60
Karl Haeg	261	Johann Posch	50
Maria Haeusler	200	Joseph Adelman	45
Adam Doerfler	150	William Boesser	40
Michael Boeser	140	Anton Kraemer	30
Johann Adelman	90	Karl Joseph Adelman	30
Bruno Yetzer	90	Wilhelm Freundsuh	30
Michael Adelman	85	Joseph Linke	20
Tobias Pahl	70	Johann Gnerer	10
Johann Baumgartner	70	Stephan Buechele	15
Johann Alt	70	Peter Steg	10
Franz Pahl	60	Wilhelm Blatz	5
Johann Hauser	60		

The total of this subscription amounted to \$2,041, and it was all paid before the end of the year 1875.

A resolution was also passed at the meeting that those who did not subscribe to the building of the church could not become members unless they would pay the contribution fixed by the trustees. This was rigorously enforced when the first of those who did not subscribe at the beginning applied for membership, he was made to pay \$125.00.

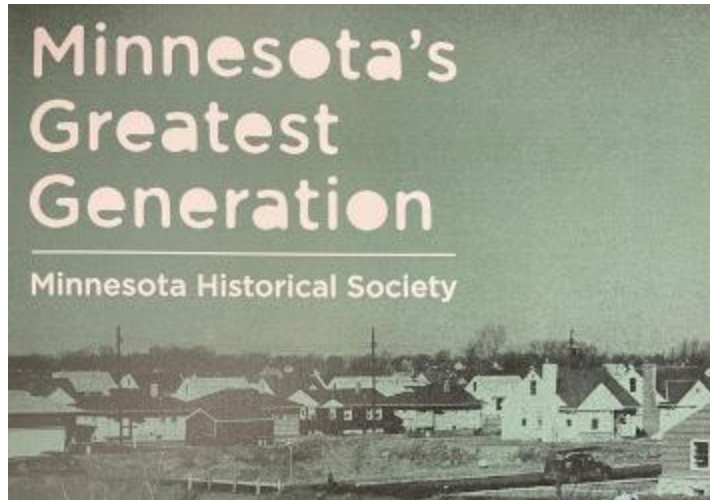
In order to satisfy the people of both townships the place where the church was to be located was called "Bloomfield". The land was bought by Valentine Haeg, Adam Doerfler and John Adelman from Hiram Layman and Eliza Layman for a sum of \$200.00.

Valentine Haeg donated more than anyone else to the founding of the church. He lived in Bloomington, so as a compromise for building the church in Richfield, the community agreed to rename the area "Bloomfield."<sup>Note</sup>

I have to say: I am now of the opinion that more 9th grade history reports should be retained in historical archives.

## ORAL HISTORIES & COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Another fantastic source of historic information about the area is the [Minnesota's Greatest Generation Oral History Project](#).



This is one of the coolest history projects I have ever found. It is dozens of interviews conducted by historians with community members from the [Greatest Generation](#) (born 1901 to 1927) to record their experiences of historical events (and mundane life).

I learned a lot from these records! One important fact: local residents referred to what is now I-494 as the "**beltline**."<sup>Note</sup>

We discussed previously the importance of good keywords when searching newspaper archives. Well, "beltline" is an *excellent* keyword! Far superior to "494" or "78th street" or "footbridge." By using "beltline" as a search term, I was able to find the following article from the Minneapolis Star which mentions a **community hearing** on the plan for the super beltline:

## Richfield Sets Hearing on New Beltline Plan

The Richfield village council Monday night delayed approval of plans for the Richfield portion of the Twin Cities "super" beltline.

Mayor Fred Kittell said the council is "100 per cent for approval" of the plan.

"But we promised the people near the road we would have an open hearing before we approved it," he said.

Last night's council meeting was adjourned to Thursday evening at 7 p.m. when objections will be heard.

The Seventy-eighth Street Property Owners association has objected to the highway on grounds it would cut property values and hurt business.

The section of road in question would run along Seventy-eighth street from the airport property to Xerxes avenue.

That article was published on Tuesday, March 1, 1955. The [Richfield City website](#) does not post records that go back to the 1960s. However, to no one's surprise, I reached out to the city and asked if they had minutes from the city council meetings on Monday, February 28, 1955 and Thursday, March 3, 1955 (the dates referenced in the article above).

And they had them! Dustin Leslie, the City Clerk for the City of Richfield, was kind enough to provide copies of the minutes from both of these meetings. Unfortunately, the minutes only say that the topic of the interstate came up and that "a discussion followed."<sup>Note</sup>



## 1. Highway Improvements

E. J. McCubrey, Minnesota Highway Department, appeared before the council to discuss the proposed highway improvement of Highway 100, being the southern boundary of the Village. A discussion followed.

## 2. Adjournment

Motion by Wallick, seconded by Shields, that the meeting be adjourned.

Carried.

In the context of these minutes, Highway 100 refers to I-494/78th street/the beltline. If you are from the area you may know Highway 100 as a road that runs north-south through Edina and St. Louis Park. There's a whole story about this that we are not going to get into right now because we *have a bridge mystery to solve*.<sup>Note</sup>

I read every other article from the *Minneapolis Star* that comes up when searching for "beltline" with no luck. I also read all the available issues of another newspaper, the *Bloomington Sun*, that were published in 1959. These aren't digitized, so I couldn't search them. Instead I skimmed all the issues on microfilm.<sup>Note</sup> I'll spare you the details: I did not find anything else about the bridge.<sup>Note</sup>

OK, we have thoroughly exhausted historical records in Minnesota. Let's take another approach to gathering evidence.

## OTHER PEDESTRIAN BRIDGES IN THE TWIN CITIES

One technique we have not used yet is just looking at *other* pedestrian bridges in the area. Those might give us some indication of why the walkways are built *generally* and therefore provide some insight into why *this* one was built.

To do this we need to establish a baseline inventory of bridges. Specifically I am interested in bridges built around the same time as the interstates in Minnesota: in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.<sup>Note</sup> MnDOT has an inventory of bridges that we explored before, but it turned out not to be a good source.<sup>Note</sup>

Instead I assessed [aerial photographs](#) taken of all the interstates shortly after they were constructed.<sup>Note</sup> The aerial photos look like this:



That section is another part of I-494. And that red arrow I added points to the only other pedestrian bridge built during that time over I-494. It *also* led to a church that was *also* a school: the [Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish](#). I think we are on to something with this school/church thing!

For good measure, I reviewed aerial photographs of all the interstates, US routes, and major state highways in the Twin Cities to identify pedestrian bridges.<sup>Note</sup>

In total I manually scanned 300 miles worth of highways.<sup>Note</sup> **I found 31 pedestrian bridges, of which 23 (74%) connected to a church or school.** That's a strong statistic!<sup>Note</sup>

Bridge number	Over road	Route name	Coords	Year built	Goes to	School or church
27V57	494	494 from Maple Grove (N) to Rte 212 (S)	44.91142, -93.44926	c1960	School and church	Yes
9078	494	494 from Rte 212 (W) to Minnesota Riv	44.86168, -93.27441	1960	Assumption School	Yes
Unknown	394	394 from 494 (W) to 94 (E)	44.97025, -93.33462	c1975	Just seems to connect two neighborhoods?	No
Unknown	394	394 from 494 (W) to 94 (E)	44.97014, -93.31456	c1960	Bryn Mawr Elementary School	Yes
9892	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.96432, -93.24013	1962	Ausberg university	Yes
27958	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.96227, -93.21325	1967	Nothing obvious; perhaps a park	No
62847	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.95187, -93.17722	1967	Utilities	NA
62849	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.95174, -93.17164	1966	Midway hospital	No
Unknown	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.95177, -93.15159	c1960	Parks & retail; Central High School	Yes
Unknown	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.95173, -93.14144	c1960	Central High School	Yes
Unknown	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.95167, -93.13131	c1960	Pilgrim Baptist Church	Yes
Unknown	94	94 from 394 (NW) to 35E (E)	44.95171, -93.12067	c1960	Unknown church	Yes
62868	94	94 from 35E (W) to 694 (E)	44.95182, -93.06264	1973	Mound Park School	Yes
Unknown	94	94 from 35E (W) to 694 (E)	44.9519, -93.05853	c1950	Mound Park School	Yes
62869	94	94 from 35E (W) to 694 (E)	44.9524, -93.03592	1974	Harding High School	Yes
9888	35W	35W from 35 split (S) to 94 (N)	44.87098, -93.29882	1960	Richfield Middle School and Richfield Church of Christ	Yes
Unknown	35W	35W from 35 split (S) to 94 (N)	44.89789, -93.2749	c1966	Windom School and Diamond Lake	Yes
Unknown	35W	35W from 35 split (S) to 94 (N)	44.93034, -93.27456	c1960	Nicollet Field (Park) - Now Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Park	No
Unknown	35W	35W from 35 split (S) to 94 (N)	44.95301, -93.2696	c1970	Minneapolis School of Art (MIA) and Mt Siani Hospital	Yes
Unknown	35W	35W from 94 (S) to 35 join (N)	44.98421, -93.24204	c1970	First Congregational Church	Yes
27985	35W	35W from 94 (S) to 35 join (N)	44.99683, -93.23834	1973	Trainyard?	No
19025	52	52 from CR42 (S) to 94 (N)	44.91757, -93.06383	1973	St Michael's School	Yes
62023	52	52 from CR42 (S) to 94 (N)	44.9238, -93.07102	1969	Roosevelt High School and Our Lady of Guadalupe Diocesan Shrine	Yes
27520	62	62 from 494 (W) to 35W (E)	44.88692, -93.33895	1963	Park	No
27061	121/65	62 from 494 (W) to 35W (E)	44.8924, -93.29445	1962	Park	No
27535	62	62 from 35W (W) to 494 (E)	44.89185, -93.25515	1967	Park	No
27530	62	62 from 35W (W) to 494 (E)	44.89834, -93.2156	1966	Morris Park School + Military	Yes
9895	100	100 from 494 (S) to 394 (N)	44.89988, -93.34932	1971	Edina Public School	Yes
9896	100	100 from 494 (S) to 394 (N)	44.90383, -93.35005	1971	Our Lady of Grace church and school	Yes
27103	100	100 from 494 (S) to 394 (N)	44.92661, -93.34955	1970	Brookside School; Slavic Church Emmanuel	Yes
27012	100	100 from 494 (S) to 394 (N)	44.95562, -93.34751	1978	Benilde High School + Beth El Synagogue	Yes
27028	77	77 from 35E (S) to 62 (N)	44.84425, -93.24675	1979	Kimball and Cedarcrest Schools	Yes

(You can [explore the full map](#) or [download the spreadsheet](#), in case you are really into maps and spreadsheets like me.)

Most of the pedestrian bridges that do not lead to a church or a school connect to a park or hospital. There are two that seem to just connect neighborhoods for no other reason. If anything, this just made me more curious about why THOSE bridges were built—but let's not get distracted.<sup>Note</sup>

## WHAT ABOUT THAT FEDERAL PROJECT NUMBER?

We have a very good working set of circumstantial evidence. But it sure would be nice to find some *direct* evidence. We exhausted all the evidence from the state and county, but what about the feds?

I went back to that federal project number from the plaque on the bridge that yielded no results when searching (494-4-32). Someone would have had to submit a proposal for those federal funds, right? The federal government has a website that tracks federal aid projects, but as I mentioned earlier it only goes back to 1992.



**Project Information**

Year \*  
1996  
1995  
1994  
1993  
1992

State \*  
Michigan  
Minnesota  
Mississippi  
Missouri  
Montana

Search

I tried writing to the St. Paul office of the Federal Highway Administration, but had no luck getting a response. Thankfully the federal government has a mechanism for requesting information in situations like this: a FOIA request.

I submitted a FOIA request about the project to the Federal Highway Administration. The answer came back quickly, but unfortunately it was just to say they did not have any records related to that project.

Dear Mr. Vigen:

This letter is in response to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Control Number 2023-0211, a search for records located in the FHWA Minnesota Division has revealed no responsive records.

The Freedom of Information Act only applies to records already in existence and does not require an agency to create, compile, or obtain from records outside the Department, or answer questions presented as FOIA requests.

However, Phil Barnes of the Federal Highway Administration Minnesota Division was most helpful in re-directing me. He said that they wouldn't have those records because they are too old; any records that were to be maintained from the 1960s would have been sent to the National Archives in Chicago.

The [National Archives](#) website is a bit tricky to search, but I eventually found [this record](#):

Record Group 406: Records of the Federal Highway Administration



Series

NOT YET AVAILABLE ONLINE

## Federal Aid Project Files, 1967–1968

**Creator: Department of Transportation. Federal Highway Administration.  
Minnesota Division Office. 4/1/1967- (Most Recent)**



NAID: 4926015



Textual Records



Collected: 1967–1968

This isn't *exactly* what I am looking for (it's the wrong year), but it's close. It's not stored in Chicago though; it seems Chicago relocates old items out to Kansas City.

I reached out to the Kansas City National Archives office.<sup>Note</sup> The Operations Director, Jake Ersland, was most gracious in pulling the item locator (table of contents) for that identifier. It indicated records for many of the projects around the one I want. Recall: I am looking for project I-494-4-32.

11.	21/14	RG 30, St Paul, MN Dist., Fed. Aid Proj. Files, 1959-63, Primary & Interstate Projects	12
		1= No label	
		2= F-003-3(5) thru F-005-1(2)	
		3= No label	
		4= F-047-2(8) thru F-013-1(3)	
		5= F-013-1(3) thru F-025-1(3)	
		6= F-026-1(2) thru F-048-1(3)	
		7= F-048-1(4) thru F-069-1(2)	
		8= F-069-1(3) thru F-069-1(1)	
		9= F-097-1(4) thru F-705(1) & I-35-1(2)48 thru I-90-1(2)000	
		10= I-090-1(10)000 thru I-494-4(25)240	
		11= I-494-4(36)240 thru I-694-5(13) & HPS-1(20) thru HPS-1(25)	
		12= HPS-1(27) thru AAD-10(1)	

Close! The project I am looking for appears to be in between runs, which isn't great. But not all those records are in order, and there were a few other boxes with similar information, so it's possible *one* of them has information on the bridge. The boxes were housed offsite in long-term storage in a bunker under a field in western Missouri. (In case you think I am exaggerating: go look at the entrance on [Google Street View](#).)

NARA can pull them out of the archives (that's what archives are for, after all). Unfortunately I would need to go in person to review them; you can't ask the National Archives staff to ruffle through a half dozen boxes looking for clues about a pedestrian bridge for you.<sup>Note</sup>

While I am dedicated to this search, I am not about to fly down to Kansas City to dig through federal archives, especially when those documents may or may not be there...

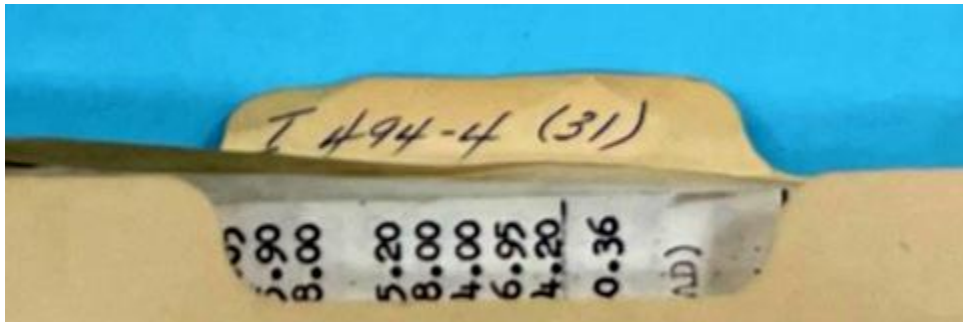
...just kidding. *Of course* I flew down to Kansas City to dig through the federal archives!<sup>Note</sup>



Jake and the NARA office staff were most helpful in providing the documents from the Minnesota Department of Public Roads. The documents, on the other hand, were not nearly as helpful.

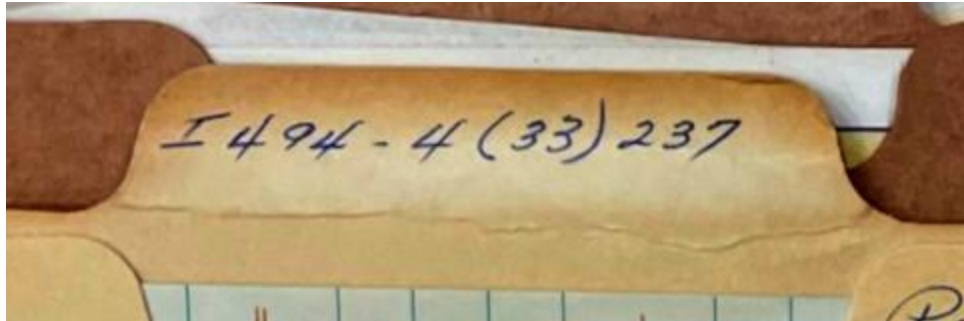
The first problem: the records for project 494-4-32 were missing!

I found project **494-4-31**:



And I found project **494-4-33**:





But I did not find the in-between project number, **494-4-32**, which is the project number for my bridge! Rats!<sup>Note</sup>

I found one mention of 494-4(32), but that was just a passing reference:

Location: Br. 9076 - Lyndale Avenue Over T.H. 494		10-15-60	10-27-58	10-14-58
Satisfactory 607/719 = 85 %		100 %	100 %	100 %
<b>(1) Completed Work</b>		All work was completed on this bridge on July 7, 1960.		
<b>(2) Work in Progress</b>		None - This project will be retained at 99% complete pending the State's request for final acceptance.		
<b>(3) Comments</b>		This project is tied to Minnesota Project U 059-1(2), U 059-1(5), I 494-4(16)239, I <b>494-4(32)236</b> and I 494-4(36)240.		
Construction activities for this project were previously reported in a single report with the above projects. A separate series of reports is now being written for each project.		Bridge 9076 X781 0.000		

That document is about a nearby bridge, the Lyndale Bridge.<sup>Note</sup> To date, this is the *only* reference I have found to that project number outside of the plaque that is physically mounted to the bridge.<sup>Note</sup>

Even if I had found the file for project 494-4-32, none of these records contain rationale for the original projects. They are basically complicated receipts and audit trails. They contain information about what was built, how much it cost, who bore the cost, and how much steel/concrete was required. They include engineering inspection reports, interviews from the workers on-site confirming they were being paid minimum wage, and even records of the specific numbers and charges for individual trees planted and removed.

Letting date 4-21-61		STATEMENT OF WORK CERTIFIED					
ITEM NO.	CONTRACT ITEM	Unit	Bid Price	CONTRACT		THIS STATEMENT	
				QUANTITY	AMOUNT	QUANTITY	AMOUNT
2571.501	F&P Rocky Mountain Juniper (4-5' High)	Tree	25.00	15.	375.00	12.	300.00
2571.501	F&P Colorado Spruce (3 1/2-4' High)	"	15.00	9.	135.00	9.	135.00
2571.501	F&P Black Hills Spruce (3 1/2-4' High)	"	16.00	22.	352.00	20.	320.00
2571.504	F&P Savin Juniper (24"-30" Spread)	Shrub	10.50	84.	882.00	35.	367.50
2571.502	F&P Green Ash (2-2 1/2" Cal.)	Tree	14.00	12.	168.00	12.	168.00
2571.503	F&P Almey Crab (5-6' High)	"	11.00	7.	77.00	7.	77.00
2571.505	F&P Tatarian Honeysuckle (3-4' High)	Shrub	1.95	80.	156.00	80.	156.00
2571.505	F&P Sweet Hockorange (3-4' High)	"	2.00	120.	240.00	120.	240.00
2571.505	F&P Common Lilac (3-4' High)	"	2.15	120.	258.00	120.	258.00
2571.505	F&P Morrow Honeysuckle (3-4' High)	"	2.00	30.	60.00	30.	60.00
2571.561	Planting Soil (Loam)	CY VM	2.50	56.	140.00	46.4	116.00
ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT (81) 00 HL.					2,843.00		2,197.50

This makes quite a bit of sense as a guard against fraud and corruption, and to ensure the works program provided the jobs it was designed to provide. You need this level of financial record-keeping to maintain an honest, transparent government. But who cares about *that* when we have a bridge mystery to solve?

So I did not learn much about why this bridge was built. But given the amount of construction audit commentary I read, at least I now know which state engineer I would want overseeing my projects if someday I become a road construction contractor in 1960.

## ONE FINAL EXPERT OPINION

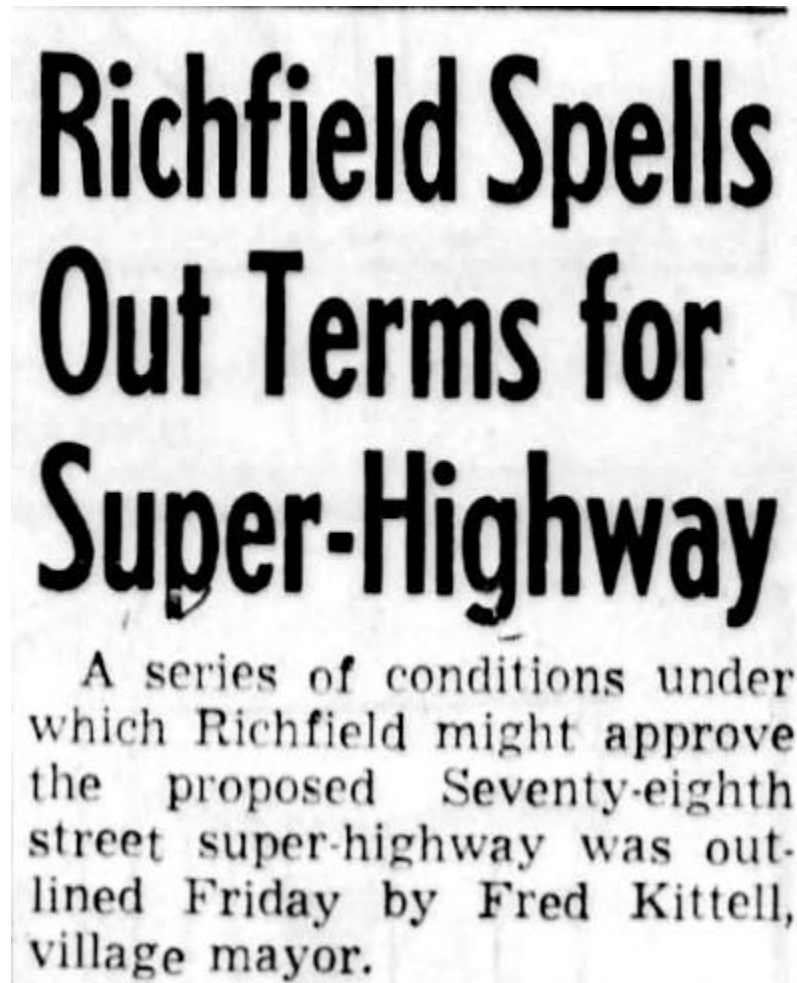
At this point I was convinced I had finally exhausted all lines of research. I had my case, and I was ready to lay it out. The evidence is circumstantial, but it's convincing. No one could say I didn't chase down every lead.

Just as I was about to put pen to paper and declare my findings, I happened to run into a colleague at a conference: Janel Forde. Janel is an expert in public operations management, including infrastructure projects. She served as the Deputy City Commissioner and Chief Operating Officer for the City of Chicago, and is [now the Chief Operating Officer for the City of Denver](#).

I showed the bridge to Janel and asked how she would solve the mystery of why it was built. She told me to stop looking at old documents: "no one writes down the real reason for infrastructure projects." She said I needed to look for *people in power*. Specifically, if I want to prove my theory, I should look for people who would be connected to both the church and the bridge.<sup>Note</sup>

So I started making a list of people in power who might meet that criteria. First on my list was Fred Kittell, who was Mayor of Richfield at the time the bridge was being planned (we ran into him earlier in that city document that just said "a discussion followed.")

The *very first result* from the *first search* I ran on that *first name* was this article from the *Minneapolis Star* in 1955:



In that article Mayor Kittell provides a list of demands from the City of Richfield to approve moving forward with the interstate. That's promising! I excitedly read on.

Among the demands from the city is this:



**A foot-bridge** should be planned at Second avenue to serve Assumption school and church.

My very first thought after reading that was, *"OH MY GOSH! THIS IS IT!!"*

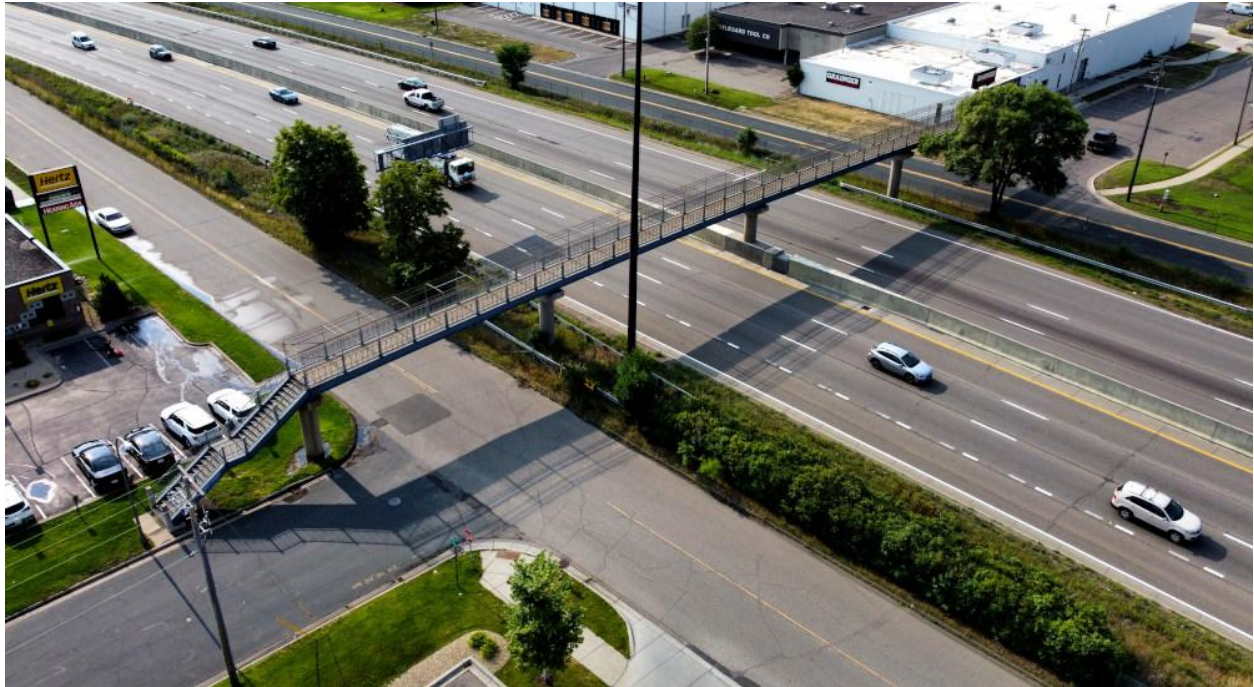
My *second* thought was, *"Wait, this whole time I could have solved this mystery from my couch? I didn't have to go to St. Paul, much less Kansas City?"*<sup>Note</sup>

But yes! It is hard to get more clear than **"A foot-bridge should be planned at Second avenue to serve Assumption school and church."** That is why the bridge is there!

## CONCLUSION

If ever there was an argument to engage a functional topic expert early, this project is it! I could have saved two months<sup>Note</sup> of research if I had talked to Janel first. I reviewed the keywords in the article to understand why it didn't come up earlier; much of the wording is ambiguous ("super-highway") or falls victim to the keyword problems we discussed before.<sup>Note</sup> The best search terms were not *road* names, they were *people's* names.

But at least now we have a *complete* answer to **the mystery of the Bloomfield bridge.**<sup>Note</sup>



This pedestrian bridge—the Bloomfield bridge, MnDOT bridge #9078, the footbridge over the super-highway that was part of Federal Project 494-4-32—was built for church-goers and schoolchildren to walk to Assumption Church and School.

Approval and funding to build the bridge were enabled by the Federal Aid Interstate Act, and at the time most other pedestrian bridges in the area were built for the same purpose and funded the same way. The location of the bridge leading to Assumption church is special because it connects two communities that have been connected for over 100 years: Bloomington and Richfield. These communities were so interconnected at this spot that the city names were at one point concatenated to *Bloomfield* in recognition of the cohesion between the two cities, cemented by the church.<sup>Note</sup>

While the official record is no more, at least this article can serve to tell the full story of Bloomfield bridge #9078.<sup>Note</sup>



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## POST SCRIPT

After publishing this article, it became popular on social media<sup>Note</sup> and in local news: I spoke with Cathy Wurzer about the project on [Minnesota Public Radio](#) and the Star Tribune [published a piece about it.](#)<sup>Note</sup>

I have received hundreds of kind emails from readers, and what a joy it has been to read them! Many local residents shared stories and memories about the area. Some shared photos,



including Rebecca Walker Benson. Rebecca also attended Assumption school as a child. She lived on the Bloomington side of the bridge, so used the bridge regularly.

Rebecca shared the following photo of students using the bridge:



### **Bridges But Not Buses**

This footbridge that crosses Minnesota Route 494 between Richfield and Bloomington was constructed by the federal and state governments for the students attending Assumption parochial grade school in Richfield. Although this safety device was built solely

for the protection of Catholic school children in crossing busy highways, parochial school students in Minnesota, as in many areas of the U.S., are not allowed to ride public school buses designed to protect schoolchildren from traffic hazards.



Wow! That's one crowded bridge! That photo of kids really makes it clear to me why locals would want a walking bridge.

We don't know what newspaper it is from, or what year it was taken. Rebecca's grandfather sent it to her many years ago. The newspaper was not local: it was from a Catholic newspaper and her grandfather lived in Huron, South Dakota at the time. That's as far as either of us got in trying to track down the source.

It's wild that that photograph made its way to me, and I love it! Thanks Rebecca!

## IT WAS THE MOMS

After writing this up, I sent a personal note and a copy of the article to everyone I encountered along the way. One of those people was Jack Kennelly. Jack doesn't appear in the story above, but I will explain his connection in this note.<sup>Note</sup>

Jack recommended I send the article to the [Bloomington Historical Society](#) and the [Richfield Historical Society](#). These are both run by wonderful people and I highly recommend you visit them.<sup>Note</sup>

After I sent it, Jean Bellefeuille from the Bloomington Historical Society graciously got back to me. She said she recalled that it was the *Assumption Mothers* who lobbied for the bridge. One mom in particular, [Gertrude Ulrich](#), was likely to have been involved given her political activism and involvement in the church at the time.

Gertrude would become very influential in Richfield politics (known as the "matriarch of Richfield"). She got her start in politics in 1955, when she petitioned city offices for a stop sign at 76th St and Lyndale Ave to protect her kids when they were walking. According to Gertrude, "I've often said that Richfield was run by women all those years because the men were gone all the time."<sup>Note</sup>

Another reader, Susan Nelson Bongaarts, also remembered the influence of mothers on the bridge. She recalls that her mom, Beryl Nelson, sent six children through Assumption School and worked hard to get the foot bridge built. Beryl's efforts earned her a spot on the City of Bloomington Safety Council, according to her daughter.

We can find no hard evidence that Gertrude or Beryl or any of the other Assumption Mothers petitioned for this bridge.<sup>Note</sup> However, this explanation seems likely to me.

I think it is important to point out the role of Gertrude, Beryl, and the mothers even without evidence, because at the time women were not commonly elected to public office. Thus, their influence on these decisions would tend to be indirect, and they would not be the ones who are quoted in newspaper articles demanding a bridge. If you require written records before you write about women in history, you'll find yourself writing about women in history far less often than they were involved in making it.

Mayor Fred Kittell may be the one cited in the *Minneapolis Star*, but it is likely that his demand was in turn influenced by Gertrude, Beryl, and other mothers at Assumption.

## MEMORIES

Finally: I have received so many memories from people about the bridge. I have found them all so heartwarming! If you enjoyed this article, you might also enjoy reading some of these.

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*I enjoyed your story about the 494 pedestrian bridge. I crossed it many times as a child going to school at Assumption. My family used to shop at Atlantic Mills. The photo of Atlantic Mills has signs in the foreground. The signs are at a Clark gas station along the frontage road. They sold cigarettes to customers in cars. Probably sold more cigarettes than gas. It was particularly busy there after masses on Sundays.*

*One feature that children liked about the bridge was that it had a little track along the stairs that you could push your bike. The empty fields on the south side of the bridge were often filled with tall weeds through which we would make paths and play in. Thanks for bringing back some great memories.*

-John

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*I grew up in that area of Bloomington in the 70s and 80s. We used that bridge frequently as kids to go to burger king, arbys, La Belles and LeeWards. But mostly when we had to walk to church in junior high and high school and our schedules didn't allow us to go with the family. (Ok sometimes we just pretended to hit church :-). I can tell you back then that bridge was used a lot more than it probably is now. It was definitely a much nicer way of walking over 494 than Nicollet or Portland.*

*Thanks for the walk through time.*

-Lou

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*I'm the youngest of 5 who grew up at 75th and 2nd Avenue on the North side of the bridge. My brother, sisters and I all went to Assumption Grade School from 1-8 grade. I remember Mrs. Simon too! We took our bikes across the bridge to the empty field on the other side. What an adventure! I was always scared to go across the bridge because I thought it could fall!*

*Thanks again for bringing back some nice memories.*

-Karen



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*I grew up on the south side of the bridge (and south of the 'field') in Bloomington. Many of my friends attended Assumption school; I didn't but we crossed the bridge often, usually to go to Atlantic Mills. The bridge was very busy on school days We could see an old building on the church property from our back yard. Great place to grow up in the 1950s-1960s. Your article was very interesting and fun to read.*

*-S.*

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*My parents were born in 1925. Dad, a New Jersey guy, came to U of M to study architecture on the GI Bill. Met my MN Mom through mutual friends. They married in 1951 and settled in Bloomington to raise 5 kids at 80th and Vincent. My maternal aunt and uncle settled in Richfield and then Edina. I was born in 1954 and went to Catholic school and church at St. Richard's Catholic church/school in Richfield until public Bloomington schools from 7th grade on.*

*That whole area you talk about along the freeway and 78th St. was our shopping and eating and movies neighborhood. Well, Southtown and Southdale specifically. Thank you for such a tenacious search to find the reason for the bridge. Great storytelling! It brought back many happy memories.*

*-Connie*

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*I remember getting a dare to stick my tongue on a metal pole on the bridge in January. Not good. -Jon*

*We used to ask truckers to honk their horns. -Dennis*

*We did the truck horn thing quite often from the bridge. I'm sorry to say we might have dropped an egg or two as well. -Dave*

*Fun memories of the walking bridge... used to go with my sister or friends to Town & Country for a real cherry soda at the fountain. -Lori*

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*My whole family grew up and went to school at Assumption- I had friends that lived across the bridge and we would go back and forth to each other's houses. This was a trip down memory lane! By the way, Mrs Simon was my principal and also my gym teacher and a very lovely, kind and fun woman! I was so glad to hear she is still alive. Thank you again!*

-Lisa

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*You brought back some of the best childhood memories of myself and brother and sister! We lived at 7900-2nd Avenue south Bloomington. And we all went to Assumption catholic school/ church. We were there until probably 1963-64. My Dad, Mother and 3 Brothers are no longer with us so that's a guess. We had such a wonderful conversation after my sister accidentally came across your article. We rode our bikes across that bridge so many times. We joked how all you had to do was just contact one of us and we would've told you all about the bridge 😊 We all thank you from the bottom of our hearts 💕 for writing this article!!*

-Colleen

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*I can echo nearly everything Ms. Anton said, although she is a few years older than me. My parents built a house in Richfield (68th & James) in 1959, on the last empty lot on the block. Almost every household in our neighborhood was headed by a veteran of WWII who was, indeed, white and essentially the same age. The GI bill enabled them to buy homes with minimal down-payments and Richfield was a hot spot for contractors who built dozens of houses at a time using only a few different floor plans. It is interesting now to pass by and notice how each seems to be unique--people have remodeled so much over time that only a few are obviously "original." And she is certainly correct in her reference to the baby boom; most families had at least 4 children, if not more. I was in the largest-ever high school graduating class in 1976 with about 850 others.*

*[. . .] contrary to your speculation, we amused ourselves by hauling our bikes (complete with banana seats and sissy bars) up the stairs, riding across at top speed and then bumping down the other side in free-fall mode. Children had a lot less supervision in those days. At one point the freeway was closed for extensive work and we would sneak there at night and ride our bikes on the fresh concrete.*

*As I recall, the thrift store you write about morphed into a LaBelle's (and is now the site of the Menard's). It was what they called a "catalog store." There was only one of each product -- a lot of housewares -- on the shelves and you walked through with an order form to fill out, turned it in at the cashier and they brought out stock from the back for you.*

*By the way, I'm also a distant cousin of Howard Kylo on my maternal grandmother's side. Thanks again for a fun morning!*

-Susan